

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HMCM WILLIAM CHARETTE

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Interview with HMCN William Charette, Medal of Honor holder for action in Korea conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, and HMCS Mark Hacala, USNR, assistant to the Force Master Chief, 17 Sept and 8 Oct 1997.

Where were you born?

Luddington, Michigan. I grew up there.

When did you decide to join the Navy?

In January of 1951.

Why did you join?

I don't know if you can remember, but back then they didn't draft you until you got to be about age 22. In other words there wasn't an awful lot you could do and if there were jobs were available, no one took you on for long term because they knew you would end up being drafted at some point when you hit 21 or 22. I think there were five of us. We decided that we'd join the Navy. All of us had worked there on the boats on the Great Lakes. We used to work the summer months on the car ferries. I say car ferries, but they hauled freight cars from Luddington Michigan to Milwaukee, Sheboygan and Kewanee.

Where did you enlist?

We actually enlisted in Luddington, took all the written tests and then we had to go to Chicago to take the physicals. We went to boot camp from there, which was at Great Lakes.

What kind of experience was that?

Cold. I was used to cold weather but it was exceptionally cold. They were building up at that time and they had a lot of guys up from Texas. And this was January and they didn't have clothes for them. So they were running around in light jackets for about a week. In fact, it took us about a week to get processed--get our clothes and stenciled and all that.

How long was boot camp at that time?

I think it was 8 weeks.

Did you put in for corps school or were you selected?

No and yes. They wanted me to be a watertender or fireman but I think I put down corpsman, dental tech, and yeoman.

So you got your first choice.

Anybody that even mentioned corpsman got it. This must have been March. They had just opened up a boot camp at Bainbridge [MD] and they also started the Hospital Corps school there.

The Korean War was going full blast at this time and they needed corpsmen. So you went to Bainbridge then?

Yes.

What are your recollections of Bainbridge?

A big empty place. I think there were maybe 150 people total on the base at that time. It's the only place I've ever been where we were allowed to hitch hike because they had no transportation out of there. As I say, they had just reactivated it and when we got there they put us to work putting beds in the barracks and all kinds of work just to get the thing off the ground. There was class one and two which was a hundred. And I was in three and four which started a week later. By the time I left there they had probably 2,000 going through Corps School alone.

What do you remember about your corps school training?

At some point, they decided they were going to give us 6 months of corps school, which was quite a bit. If I remember correctly, nobody went directly to the Marine Corps. We all went to hospitals for further training. A Marine would spend a year in Korea and then be rotated back. Some congresswoman went over there and found out that the hospital corpsmen were spending a year and a half and, of course, she made some comment so the next thing you know they was this tremendous influx of corpsmen. In other words, they were pushing us through at quite a clip.

What specific medical training did you get in corps school?

They had called a lot of reserves and we had one who taught us first aid. He had been with the Marines and had been a first class and had made a couple of landings. He always would tell us to ignore that part where they would put sulfa on the wounds because they were using the movies as training aids that they had used in World War II. He'd tell us to disregard that part because they didn't want us to do that anymore.

Instead of sprinkling sulfa into the wounds, what did they teach you to do with an open wound?

Just put a battle dressing on it and treat it as best we

could and get him out of there.

Were they teaching you anything about penicillin at this point?

They brought it up. In other words, you weren't going to treat him with penicillin.

So you just learned the standard first aid treatment that a World War II corpsman would have learned such as how to apply a battle dressing and administer morphine and things like that.

Yes. As a matter of fact, most of the stuff that was in use was from World War II. They taught nursing also. It was a full-blown corps school. When you got out of there they figured you would end up at a hospital and working a ward for a while and at some point the odds were that you would be heading for Korea.

Where did they send you after you graduated from corps school?

I went to the naval hospital in Charleston, SC, and ended up on a ward.

What kind of ward was it?

I went to clean orthopedics and worked there for over a year. I got tired of that and then went to neuropsychiatric and worked there for as long as I could--6 months. They had a ward that was intended for 25 locked and they ended up carrying 45 or more. What was so funny about it was that they were drafting Puerto Ricans. We would get 5-10 of them out of Parris Island. And they didn't speak English and didn't understand what the Marines were doing. They weren't mental patients. They just didn't savvy.

You mean they were being admitted as patients?

Yes. I'll tell you this much. We had maybe five alcoholics out of the Navy. We'd run maybe five combat vets who were suffering from combat fatigue, four epileptics, and then of course our Puerto Ricans. We'd have a riot at least once a week when they had to pull everybody in to quell this thing. It was beyond belief.

You mean the riot was on the wards? Were they using weapons?

No. I'll tell you. If a man worked there for 6 months,

they took away his keys and locked him up. As I think back, the doctors we had were excellent. They would tell us the various symptoms and so forth. When Forrestal went out the window there at Bethesda, they cleaned out their whole psychiatric department and we got a couple of doctors that were pretty good out of that incident.

Were these psychiatrists you worked with new in the Navy or were they veterans of World War II?

Most of them were reserves on recall. The head psychiatrist was a lieutenant commander and he had gotten out of the Navy and came back in because of the Korean War. He had been recalled. He was very good. We used shock treatment. We didn't use insulin then. They had gotten away from using lobotomy. If we couldn't handle them, eventually we would send them to Bethesda.

While I was there Walter Winchell's son was down at Parris Island and he lasted a week or two max. He ended up there with us. Walter Winchell would announce in his broadcasts. "If you have a son in Korea, write to him and if you have a son in Parris Island pray for him."

When did you learn you had been selected for the FMF?

I got there in September and I left the following September--'52.

Did you volunteer or did they just pick you?

Both. I knew that sometime between then and Christmas I would be going to the FMF because I had been there as long as they kept most people. There were probably over 300 E-3 and E-4 and that was quite a few for that hospital. I volunteered because I figured I was going in September anyway.

Were you looking forward to going with the Marines or was it something that you dreaded?

No, I didn't dread it but you have to understand that I already had a couple of friends who had been killed in Korea. I knew that you could get killed over there, which I really didn't relish. So, I ended up volunteering. I think I got to Pendleton in September or October.

You went to Field Medical Service School there.

Yes.

What kind of experience was that?

They gave us a certain amount of time learning to use and M1 and a carbine and a .45 and how the Marines would try to take a position. They broke us into rifle companies. In other words, we'd have a squad of three fire teams and a squad leader. I can't remember how long the school was but I do remember part of it was learning Marine Corps and part was learning first aid.

Did you learn the whole organizational system, the breakdown of how they had support units and infantry units set up?

Not really so much for that as for company. In other words, you'd have three fire teams to a squad and in that would be four men. You'd have a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle), an assistant BAR and two riflemen. We made some landings and they'd put signs on simulated casualties. A leg was blown off, etc. and you'd treat them.

Did you actually work with LCVPs (Landing Craft Vehicles and Personnel)?

Yes.

The medical training, then, was several stages more advanced from what you saw in corps school.

Oh, yes. It was a little more advanced.

Were they still using serum albumin as a blood volume expander?

Yes. Everything else was World War II.

What about plasma?

No. We just had serum albumen. That's all they gave the front line corpsmen because they felt you would be back into a battalion or regimental aid station in a very short time. Trench warfare had already started by the time I went to the FMF.

Were you issued the Unit I medical bag in Field Med School?

Yes.

What were some of the item you might have carried in the Unit I?

We carried APCs and band aids, a sewing kit, scissors, and an instrument set, battle dressings, a couple of tourniquets,

and morphine.

How many syrettes of morphine were you provided for in that kit?

When I got to Korea, I think I carried 10 or 15 of the quarter grain size.

How were the battle dressings packaged?

The larger ones came in a foil package.

When did you get to Korea?

I hit Japan in the very first or second week of January.

How did you get over there?

In those days you had two ways and they were by draft. I recall I was in draft 29 1/2. I use the term half because if you were with the 29th draft this meant you went over with a Marine company. In other word, you were integrated right into that outfit and you went over. But that didn't mean you'd stay with that company as in the old days. These were just replacements. They would go over by ship. We went over by plane. It was a rather large commercial plane as I recall. We landed in Hawaii and spent a day there and then went on to Japan where we spent a week. A week later we were in Korea.

What did you do for that week in Japan?

They issued us M1s and we went out to a firing range because these were the rifles we were taking to Korea. We really didn't do much.

Were the M1s issued to hospital corpsmen and Marines alike?

Yes.

Is that were you were expected to carry out in the field the whole time you were there?

I always thought an M1 was too damn big, not that I didn't appreciate it but the fact is that when you're trying to take care of someone, the only thing it's good for is a splint. I eventually got a carbine.

Did you also carry a pistol?

I had a pistol for a while.

Where did you land in Korea?

I don't recall. They issued us 782 gear at this city and they took our seabags and they kept them back there.

What was the 782 gear?

It was a big waterproof bag and a packboard, which was so much better than I had used prior to that time for carrying things. We got thermal boots--mostly cold weather stuff.

Did you arrive with your war belt and your pack, canteens, and all that?

No. We were issued that with our thermal gear.

Once you arrive in Korea, how were you organized?

We were at this city for 1 day, and that night we loaded on a train and just took off. I know that when we got off the train, I cannot tell you exactly where we were but I just know we were very close to the 38th Parallel. I remember being told where I was going to go. At this time, all corpsmen who went over there, if you were HA, HN, or Third, you went to a rifle company and replaced some guy who had been there because the usual stay with a rifle company back then was about 4 months. Then you would be replaced by some new guy and rotated back to battalion aid or regiment, or a tank outfit, or mortars. Again the rotation would take place, and you'd go back usually to a med company. I think this was probably battalion. They were forming us up to send us up. I know I was talking to corpsmen who had been there for a while and they just got a report that some Marine Corps engineer driving a caterpillar doing a road fell into a river and drowned. I thought, gee, that's a helluva thing to be over here in a combat area and you get killed in an accident.

Did they do a pretty good job amalgamated you replacements?

No. They didn't know how long you were going to be with any outfit. I was very fortunate. I didn't go right to a company right on the line. I went to a company that was in reserve. I was there probably over a week. The guy I replaced stayed there a couple of days and I was introduced around. About 2 or 3 weeks later the guy I used to work with on the orthopedic ward showed up and he was the other corpsman in my platoon. That was really strange. We were really good friends and we are today. I felt he was brand new and I had to show him the ropes. That's something you learn awfully quick.

Were the Marines rotating through as quickly as the corpsmen?

I don't think so. If you were a Marine rifleman you went to a rifle company and the odds were that unless you got shot you were going to be there because they didn't rotate them back. They would draft them back. In other words, you'd spend a year with a rifle company and then you'd be rotated back, whereas corpsmen would come up and they would rotate them back out of a rifle company.

Did the Marines take to you fairly well?

Oh, yes. No problem.

How long was it before you actually went out to the line?

I was probably there for 4 days. We would go out and string barbed wire at night. We wouldn't come under small arms so much as mortar.

Were you in the same vicinity as the Nevada City outposts at that time?

Fairly close because the Marines hooked up with the Army and then they rolled over to the Panmunjom Corridor where the peace talks were going on. I can recall in the first week they sent us out on a daytime patrol and the idea was that if they fired on us they would be firing into that neutral zone. We passed two tanks that were sitting there. If they did fire on us they were to give overhead fire because they would be firing away from this thing. We found quite a few dead Chinamen in our travels. They had been digging these fighting holes and come closer and closer to our lines and we were blowing them up. They had left out a bunch of things for us--handkerchiefs and literature, or should I say, propaganda. In other words, the guys at home are making a fortune while you're here giving your life. Keep this pass and you can pass through our lines and sit the war out and go home--all kinds of stuff.

Were you encountering any North Koreans at this time or just Chinese?

I would have to say just Chinese but I can't be sure.

Did they seem to be well equipped or were they fairly scantily dressed?

No. Insofar as that quilted uniform they had, they all had them and looked fairly warm. They had those rubber tennis

shoes, not tennis shoes per se but a heavy rubber. I was thinking how they must have gotten cold in those. But you could smell those Chinese.

What did they smell like?

Garlic. And you smell them a long way off if the wind was right. If you saw bodies if they had been killed fairly recently, they wouldn't have any decay odor. That's just the way they would smell. I suspect it had a helluva lot to do with what they ate.

What month was this?

I must have gotten there in latter February. We had already been told that we were going to go back on line and we were out on patrol. When you got nothing else to do they like to keep the Marines busy. This was a midnight patrol and we were just practicing as a full squad. The Chinese liked to open mortar barrages just as it was turning dusk. If you are going to fire back at them, by the time you get your counter-fire, it's dark. Then they come in right under their own mortars. They always did this. You could really tell that they had used an awful lot of mortar plus artillery on this barrage. This guy next to me says, "Jesus Christ, that's Reno, Vegas, and Carson. The Shit's hit the fan."

That would have been the evening of the 26th.

That's right. We were there for a little while and then they cancelled the whole thing. We went back in. We loaded up and then we were issued grenades and ammo and we started on these trucks. When we got there it was fairly early in the morning and we just stayed there in this huge zone. They didn't have any incoming in there but we were using our own planes and artillery. They told us very early in the morning that Reno, Vegas, and Carson had fallen. I know that it was probably noon when they decided we were going to retake.... And it fell to my company to retake Vegas.

What company were you with?

Fox 2/7.

What was the topography like in that area?

You have to understand that Korea is all hills. You're either walking up or down hill and if there's any level area, it's a rice paddy. It's that simple. Vegas was a fairly good

sized hill. IT wasn't a giant of a hill but good size.

What do you recall about that whole incident?

The main thing is that the Marines could not get their dead back. As a matter of fact, when we went it was through a blocking gate that was barbed wire strung. When you looked out over the landscape I can only tell you that they had used 60 mortars and they were in blocks probably 3 feet by 3 feet by 3 feet. You could see where they had hit and they still had guys hanging in this wire. The first real casualty I have saw was hanging in the wire and he must have taken a mortar right on top of the head because there was nothing but the pelvis left. What a grisly sight! And there was another guy that was pretty messed up. We had to cross this rice paddy that had a stream right in the center of it. Of course, I was right in back of the lieutenant and all I can remember. He said, "Give me 20 yards and then you take off. Pass the word back, 20 yards." So he started running. I gave him his 20 yards, and Christ, I was just about next to him by this stream. The idea was by spreading out like that they wouldn't fire. But you know how you think of things afterward. I got to thinking, if they had fired we would have been dead if they had used mortars when we crossed there. It was a beautiful day and all I could think of was *Death in the Afternoon* by Hemingway. I know that's about bullfighting but still it was something that struck me.

They did fire small arms as soon as they could.

Where was the enemy in relation to where you were?

They were on the hill and we were down in the paddy area. But again, we had other hills and valleys that were the approach to there. They could only get a shot at us when we came up over the skyline and then you'd drop down. If you were right at the base of that hill but we were on a long finger which was a trench that was dug out and that's how we were going. We were following this trench line. I ended up starting to treat a lot of guys that had been shot up in the 5th. They didn't have a chance to get them out of there. One guy I started treating had a dead corpsman lying next to him. I kept thinking that if I roll that man over I'll know who he is and I don't want to know who he is. We had all come there about the same time.

The corpsman had been treating the Marine when he was killed?

Yes.

How did you evacuate the wounded after you treated them?

They had stretcher bearers following us up. I told the Marine I treated that I was afraid to move him by myself but not to worry because the stretcher bearers would get him. And then I treated another guy. He wasn't bad. I just threw a couple of battle dressings and he didn't really need them.

That brings up something that I should mention. If it's very cold, seldom will you bleed to death. And it was just cold enough that the blood would coagulate pretty easily.

Did you have to start them on serum albumin?

Not at that time. Later I did on one guy but that was a problem. You couldn't use a flashlight, a cigarette lighter. Hell, you couldn't even smoke a cigarette towards the latter part of the evening. Like I said, I got attached from my platoon and ended up in another platoon. My platoon sergeant was a short-timer and he had a short-timer attitude. I think he was ready to go back. Matter of fact, he was in the next draft. His replacement as due to come in and relieve him. This was a pretty bad situation.